Basic Communication Skills

Nearly every aspect of planning requires that a planner come in contact with the public -- through group meetings and review sessions, as well as one-on-one office appointments, writing, and telephone conversations. Though most of these contacts are positive interactions, each has the potential to become adversarial if handled inappropriately. While interpersonal communication skills are rarely part of professional curricula, they are so fundamental to public participation in planning that we begin the description of participation tools with some communication "tricks of the trade".

- **One-on-one interaction**
- **Writing Skills**
- **Presentation Skills**
- **Facilitation Skills**

One-on-one (interpersonal) skills

Success in most professions, including planning, depends on effective one-on-one interaction. While there is an entire industry dedicated to interpersonal communication (e.g., Dale Carnegie's "How to Win Friends and Influence People"), here we simply outline some fairly obvious objectives. The challenge is to apply these skills, especially when confronted with anxious, impatient, or confrontational clients.

Be responsive The first order of business is to be available, accessible, and responsive. While this is often difficult with busy schedules, it is important to serve the client: make time in your schedule to be available, respond to phone calls, e-mails, and other inquiries in a timely manner, develop back-up mechanisms for responding when you are unavailable.

Be engaging "Be alive!" "Look the client squarely in the eyes!" "Be an active listener." Connecting with the client often takes some work, and it is important to make the effort to focus attention on the request or issues at hand. Paraphrasing and other methods are helpful to assure clients that you hear and are interested in what they say. Most often this

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Writing Skills

Writing skills are critical to many aspects of planning, since decisionmaking processes generally involve a variety of reporting methods, and both internal and external forms of correspondence. While writing techniques vary slightly by the type of document produced, the following hints will generally apply:

Be responsive

It is important to acknowledge the receipt of an email message, to confirm a phone conversation or to follow-up on an office visit in a timely fashion --even if there are tasks yet to be done. This is particularly critical if local rule or state statute places a time limit on the response or final decision.

Be concise

•Make sure the reader understands the purpose of and the message in the correspondence right away. When possible, keep letters and memos to a single page, and make email messages short (since longer messages will have to be printed).

•Margins and font sizes can be adjusted to reduce overall length, but remember to be kind to the eyes!

Be systematic and orderly

•Use short paragraphs with bullet statements or numbered lists if multiple points are to be made.

•On longer documents, use headings and subheadings to lead the reader through the document's structure and content. Each section should be reasonably self-contained, with an introductory statement and a brief summary or transition to the next section.

•The larger document should begin with an overview of the issue addressed, the purpose of the report, and its organization; it should conclude with a summary, synthesis, discussion, or recommendation that neatly ties up the report. This section should connect back to the purpose of the report.

Be professional

•Focus on "action" rather than "information", and avoid first person and passive tense in your writing.

•Revise, rewrite and proof-read to be certain your message is clear, factually accurate and grammatically correct.

•Use humor when appropriate, especially for less formal communications such as email.

•Give credit where credit is due: referencing can be important. The author-date method is perhaps the easiest ((Randolph, 1996) with an alphabetical list of "References Cited" at the

approach leads to the most effective and efficient outcome.

Be pleasant Work should be fun! A smile and some humor go a long way toward breaking the ice, easing anxiety, defusing conflict, and thereby increasingly the channels of communication.

Be patient "Treat impatient people with patience" is one of the most difficult skills in interpersonal communication, but one of the most important for public officials. Often times it is important to give clients the opportunity to vent before trying to get to the root of the problem and find solutions.

Be clear Clarity of communication is critical. Active listening and paraphrasing are a critical first step.It is also important to leave the client with a clear idea of where your stand, what to expect, and what next steps to take.

Be positive It is easy to look at the "dark side" of any situation. One of the important skills of interpersonal communication is to look at a situation in a positive light, to empathize with the client, and to seek solutions.

Be realistic   While it is important to be positive, it is critical to be realistic. If there are difficult or insurmountable problems, the client needs to know.

Be a problem solver All of these skills amount to being a problem solver, or one actively involved in trying to resolve a client's concerns. Helping people solve their problems through responsiveness, engagement, patience, clarity, and a positive, empathetic and realistic approach is the best way to perform the role of public servant and to "win friends and influence people."

end of the report), but other referencing conventions are acceptable; quotations should be referenced to a source's page number (Randolph, 1996, p.14).

Be creative

Non-text graphics or tables can help break up the text; tables summarizing main points help organize the report, force you to clarify the points, and help the reader focus on the main points at a glance.

Be careful!

Make use of cc, bcc, "forward" and other means for increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of correspondence, but be certain you know who will receive the message. Also be mindful of the fact that these are "official" documents that can be forwarded or copied for broader viewing (under the Freedom of Information Act).

Presentation Skills

Making presentations to small or large groups is another essential task for planners (and really for any profession). Like writing skills, presentation skills are honed through practice. Still, there are some "tricks of the trade" that enhance the quality and effectiveness of presentations.
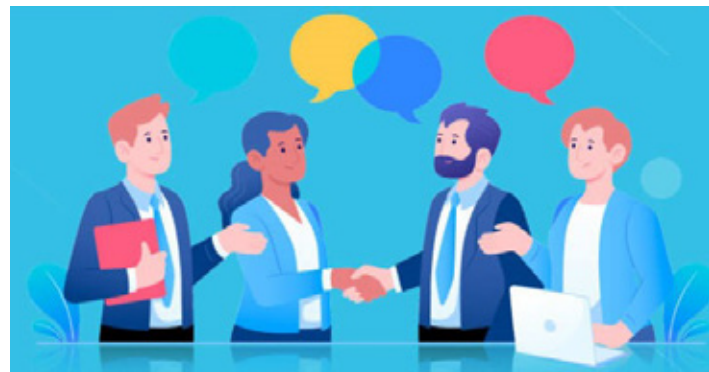
Research

•Know your audience and relate your talk to it.

•Know your time limits and stick to them.

•Know your context (other speakers and what they are saying).

Prepare

•Clarify 3-5 key points: introduce them, discuss them, conclude with them.

•Use effective audio-visual tools (overheads, slides, Power-Point, handouts) to clarify your main points and to help the audience visualize your message. Rules of thumb for slides:

- Limit words to 10-15 per slide

- Use several simple slides rather than one complicated one

- Dark backgrounds (with white or light lettering) and large type are easier to read

•Rehearse.

Present

•Engage your audience (eye contact, personalization, humor); create excitement, challenge traditional thinking.

•Neither read a presentation, nor deliver it "off the cuff." Prepare well so it appears you are simply talking with the audience whether you are working from a prepared text or not.

•Coordinate your slides with the talk. Don't leave slide on screen after you've covered it. Operate slide controls yourself (if possible).

Facilitation Skills

Running and facilitating group meetings is an essential communication skill, and one that often employs a number of participation skills and tools, and especially an understanding group dynamics (see also facilitating (capacity building), public meetings, workshops, focus groups, stakeholder collaboration). [need links to each of these tools]

A facilitator works with a group and provides procedural help in moving toward consensus. The facilitator is neutral to the issues or topics under discussion and operates with the consent of the participants. It is helpful if the facilitator is also intimately familiar with the subject matter of the discussion.

Since facilitated meetings typically involve representatives from a wide variety of community groups or other stakeholders, these participants are likely to hold different views on the issues under consideration. The facilitator should encourage all participants to share

their viewpoints and participate in the discussion. Hypothetical questions sometimes help to get discussion moving. The facilitator elicits both facts and opinions and helps the group distinguish between them.

Some hints for better facilitation:

1. Watch group vibes: If people seem bored or inattentive, you may have to speed up the pace of the meeting. If people seem tense because of unvoiced disagreements, you may have to bring concerns out into the open.

2. Ask open ended questions: For instance, "We seem to be having trouble resolving the matter. What do you think we should do?"

3. Summarize what others say: For instance, you might say, "It seems we agree that . .. "

4. Make sure everyone gets a chance to speak: One way of ensuring quiet people get a chance to speak is to initiate a round. In a round you move around the table with everyone getting a few minutes to present their views.

5. Inject humor: There a few better ways of overcoming cranky, niggling or petty behavior.

6. Learn to deal with difficult behavior:

Flare-ups: When two members get into a heated discussion summarize the points made by each, then turn the discussion back to the group. ·

Grand standing: Interrupt the one-man show with a statement that gives him credit for his contribution, but ask him to reserve his other points for later. Alternatively, interrupt with, "You have brought up a great many points. Would anyone like to take up one of these points?" ·

Broken recording: When someone keeps repeating the same point, assure them their point has been heard. If necessary ask the group if they want to allow the person to finish making their point. ·

Interrupting: Step in immediately with, "Hold on, let X finish what they have to say." If necessary, ask the person who tends to interrupt to act as the recorder for the meeting.·

Continual criticizing: Legitimize negative feelings on difficult issues. You might say, "Yes, it will be tough to reduce traffic congestion on Marguerite, but there are successful models we can look at." If necessary, ask the critical person to take on an achievable task.

7. Suggest options when time runs out: Identify areas of partial consensus, suggest tabling the question, or create a small subcommittee to deal with the matter at a time of their choosing.

8. Consider a round at the end of the meeting: Going quickly around the whole group gives people a chance to bring up matters not on the agenda. You can also use a round to evaluate the meeting.

Facilitation and Facilitators

1. A facilitative individual is one who is easy to work with, a team player, a person aware of individual and group dynamics. He or she is skilled in communication, collaborative problem solving, consensus building, and conflict resolution.

2. A facilitator is an individual who enables groups ad organizations to work more effectively and to collaborate. He or she is a "content neutral" party who by not taking sides during the meeting, can advocate for fair, open, and inclusive discussions to accomplish the group's work.

3. A facilitative leader is one who is aware of group and organizational dynamics; one who creates organization-wide involvement processes which enable members of the organization to more fully utilize their potential to help the organization articulate and achieve its vision and goals. There is a difference between facilitating and leading and facilitative leaders often use facilitators in their organizations.

4. A facilitative group (team, task force, committee) is one in which facilitative mindsets and behaviors are widely distributed among the members. Such a group is minimally dysfunctional, is easy to join, and works well together and with other groups.